

SARALA JAG MOHAN-PROFILE OF A TRANSLATOR



—NILIMA JHA

“My desire to share the joy of reading a good book with children led me to translation,” says Sarala Jag Mohan, an acknowledged translator of children’s books. At home in three languages, English, Hindi and her mother tongue Gujarati, she has more linguistic competence in totality than a creative writer who knows only one language.

Recipient of the prestigious *Dwivageesh* award for translation work by *Bhartiya Anuvad Parishad*, and two years later also honoured by the *Kanpur Bal Kalyan Sansthan*, she is not anxious to capture the limelight. However, these awards have certainly brought her name and fame.

She is a warm and sincere personality. There is a natural dignity and unpretentious directness about her, with her expression thoughtful, sometimes almost bordering on concern, but ready to melt into a broad smile or even break into a loud laugh at the slightest provocation. She strikes you as a refreshingly authentic person.

Sitting on the sun-filled terrace of her house,

she reveals that she had always been interested in children’s literature, but she first translated stories in *Jhagmag*, a Gujarati weekly paper for children in 1956. She translated these stories from English into Gujarati. She also translated some of the stories for a monthly magazine, *Ramakadu*.

Being a low profile person, she is reluctant to talk about herself. “What is there to say?” she asks amused. When coaxed, she says, “My father sowed the seeds of love for literature. I remember, when I was five years old, he gave me a book *Nani Nani Vartao* (little stories) in Gujarati. That was the first book I read. I wanted to complete reading the whole book at one go but unfortunately it took me a long time to finish it,” she laughs, reminiscing. She read *Noah’s Ark* when she was eight years old. Encouraged by her father, she read many children’s books and they left a deep imprint on her sensitive mind. This was the beginning, which in the course of time made her a lover of books, and from this a desire to share the best of the world’s children’s literature was perhaps born.

She feels that only translation can help in reaching good literature to a wider audience across linguistic and geographical barriers. At the same time, she acknowledges that translating children’s literature is different and more difficult than translating adult literature. “A translator needs to have something more than a good knowledge of the two languages. The person must also have the ability to use the words and expressions to suit the range of understanding of the children. In adult literature you can play with words but not so much in

children's literature." Although there is no hard and fast rule to follow while translating children's literature, she feels that the adult in the translator should recede into the background, except to the extent to see that nothing incorrect or faulty enters the language. Looking vibrant and animated, she continues, "The translator should be able to place himself at the intellectual and emotional level of children and then make the translation so natural, effortless and lively that it does not read and sound like a translation."

This statement of hers leads to another question. "Should a translator also have creative ability?" With her characteristic directness she answers, "Unless the translator has some element of creativity he/she cannot be a successful translator." According to her, a mechanical reproduction in place of an artistic creation will make the piece of literature less enjoyable. "One has to create an illusion for oneself that he/she is writing and not translating. The person must have the sensibilities and feelings of a creative artist to do justice to a work of translation," she explains.

When asked which children's book she has enjoyed translating most, looking excited, she says, "One is *India in Space* by Mohan Sunder Rajan." She translated this book from English into Gujarati for the Publications Division. The other one is Dilip Salwi's *Passage to Antarctica* which she translated from English into Hindi for the Children's Book Trust. "Why?" She takes a moment off to smile and then says, "I enjoyed translating these books because they were a challenge to my ability to translate." Mohan Sunder Rajan's book was based on scientific facts and she had to be very careful in choosing the correct technical, scientific and other related terms. On the other hand, Dilip Salwi's book demanded a complete fusion of facts and fiction. While translating, she had to translate scientific terms and weave them in such a way that they got absorbed in the language. All this she found

quite challenging.

Why has she not done much original writing of her own for children? "I have less ability to write for children," she says with disarming honesty.

One learns, as she talks that translators cannot take liberty with the original work except to the extent of making the translated pieces look as real and natural as the original ones. "The translator has to familiarize himself with the author's tone and text and is not allowed to add or subtract anything. Therefore translating becomes difficult." She goes on to add, "the original writer may know only one language, while the translator has to have a knowledge of both the languages as well as have some creative talent of his own."

When pointed out that translation is normally considered secondary to creative writing, she comments, "I don't think so. Original writing and translation are two different art-forms. There is no question of putting one above the other." Her view is that any translation should stand on its own. She then says musingly, "Writers have their own individualistic styles in dealing with a particular topic, so have the translators." Using her hands to emphasize her point, she continues, "The difference in the writing of two persons marks out the difference in creativity in a person." Having made her point clear she looks relaxed and at ease with herself.

Which was more difficult- translating old classics or modern children stories? "Persons steeped in translating classics will find it rather hard to translate modern stories and vice versa." Personally she is of the opinion that translating classics is more difficult.

One can sense her unhappiness at the plight of translators. She feels that they have seldom been given the acclaim due to them. "Translators are underpaid. Although writers want their works to be translated, they quite often do not like to acknowledge the work and effort put in by the translator. But fortunately, things are now chang-

ing gradually, as there is a growing realization that the world cannot do without translation," she says smilingly.

"Any hobbies?" "I don't require any hobby. I enjoy my work immensely." Then suddenly and unexpectedly she confides with a twinkle in her bespectacled eyes, "I rejoice at the sight of beauty in life and nature. I enjoy a lovely sunset." With childlike spontaneity she adds, "I feel romantic when it is raining," then she bursts into mischievous laughter.

Looking back at her life with reasonable pride and happiness, she stresses, "I don't believe in making future plans. I face life as it comes."

Then again, talking about translation she says, "Translation is the only medium through which the best literature in different languages reaches young minds. One has to be dedicated and also have a certain idealism and willingness to forgo the soulless pursuit of material rewards," she feels. "At least I am not one of those who have deleted idealism from my life."

As I get up to leave, I see a chair near the book packed shelf. "I sit and do all my work here," she points out. One can feel the dedication and discipline with which Sarala Jag Mohan has been working all these years towards sharing and reaching out to children through the joy of reading the best books of literature.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS TRANSLATED BY SARALA JAG MOHAN:

1. *Freedom Struggle* by Bepin Chandra & other historians (NBT), from English into Gujarati, 1973.
2. *India in Space* by Mohan Sundar Rajan (Publications Division), from English into Gujarati, 1978.
3. *The Story of Red Cross* by Krishna Satyanand (Nehru Bal Pustakalaya, NBT),

from English into Gujarati, 1975.

4. *Who's Who at the Zoo* by Ruskin Bond (Nehru Bal Pustakalaya, NBT), from English into Gujarati, 1983.
5. *How Films are Made* by K.A. Abbas (Nehru Bal Pustakalaya, NBT), from English into Gujarati, 1983.
6. *Our Useful Plants* (Nehru Bal Pustakalaya, NBT), from English into Gujarati, 1983.
7. *Vetal Kathayen* (Publications Division) from Hindi into Gujarati.
8. *Jangal mein Mor Nacha* by Dr. S.S. Shashi (Publications Division), from Hindi into Gujarati (to be published).
9. *Dham Dhamadham Children's poems* by Kamla Bhasin (Unicef), from Hindi into Gujarati.
10. *Partha Kah Charhave Baan* by Pannalal Patel, (done as private assignment from the author) from Gujarati into Hindi (unpublished).
11. *Shri Krishna Kishore Kathao* by Pannalal Patel, from Gujarati into Hindi (unpublished).
12. *A Passage to Antarctica* by Dilip Salwi (CBT), from English into Hindi, 1991.
13. *Remembering Sarojini Naidu* by Sarala Jag Mohan (CBT), from English into Hindi (to be published).
14. *Remembering Abul Kalam Azad* by Gulam Haider (CBT), from English into Hindi (to be published).
15. *Roma Bacche* by Dr. S.S. Shashi (privately assigned), from Hindi into English (to be published).